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ABSTRACT

Guidelines are offered for parents considering placing their children in day care. Contents concern: (1) information on finding high-quality day care providers; (2) safety tips for children in day care; (3) ways of detecting sexual abuse and exploitation; and (4) what to do if a child discloses acts of abuse and exploitation in the day care center. (RH)

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# Just in case...

## Parental guidelines in case you are considering daycare

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN

The National Resource Center on Child Sexual Abuse

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# Parental guidelines in case you are considering daycare

Parents who pay careful attention to choosing quality daycare can provide an ideal environment for their children during the day—one that presents challenging educational opportunities and allows young children to play creatively and socialize with each other. Most daycare centers are well-run, reliable facilities staffed by experienced personnel who feel a strong responsibility toward the children under their care. Recently, however, several highly publicized cases of child abuse in daycare centers have alarmed parents, child-care professionals, and law-enforcement.

Because parents want the best possible care for their children during the day, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has developed this brochure to help parents find quality daycare providers, teach their children how to prevent abuse, identify the warning signs of sexual and physical abuse and exploitation, and learn what to do if sexual and physical abuse or exploitation is suspected or disclosed.

A 1988 nationwide study on sexual abuse in daycare—used as the basis for many of the recommendations in this brochure—confirms that children are generally safe in daycare; in fact, abuse happens more often in the home than in daycare facilities. Nevertheless, sexual and physical abuse and exploitation in daycare do occur, and parents should be prepared with the prevention tools they need to protect their children.

It is critical for parents to understand that most child abuse, including daycare abuse, is not committed by the stereotypical "dirty old man" who drifts into town and lures children to his lair under the bridge. Sexual and physical abuse and exploitation are committed by persons who are known to the children, who have often gained the children's trust and affection, and who may threaten or bribe the children into silence. Daycare abusers are not always males; in fact, a significant number of females (40 percent in the study) commit daycare abuse.

### Finding Quality Daycare Providers

Excellent sources of information on quality daycare providers are the recommendations of family, friends, and neighbors. Lists of licensed daycare providers may also be available from the local department of social services, daycare licensing offices, local schools, and community resource centers. While the large majority of daycare centers are safe, your children may still be at risk of sexual and physical abuse or exploitation regardless of whether the daycare center

is small or large, high-priced or inexpensive, public or private, in the inner city or out in the country.

Visit prospective daycare centers, take a tour, and interview the daycare staff personally, observing their interaction with your children and the other children. Look for mature and responsible people who listen and respond well to your children and appear relaxed and happy with them. Also arrange to meet with other individuals who may have contact with your child, such as bus drivers, janitors, and relatives of the daycare personnel. When you have a list of possible daycare centers, check their references carefully. Contact the local police department and department of social services to determine if any reports have been made on the daycare provider.

While not a guarantee against daycare abuse, if you choose a larger center, it is a good idea to select a daycare facility that is licensed and that makes criminal history background checks on its employees. When you have chosen a daycare provider, the best way to get to know the staff and observe their behavior first-hand is to involve yourself in some way in the activities of the center by volunteering to assist on field trips or special events.

Following is a list of specific recommendations that will help you choose a safe and secure daycare center and help reduce the risk of sexual and physical abuse and exploitation of children in daycare.

1. Make sure that the daycare center is designed so that parents are fully free to come and go, with no requirements to call first and no areas off limits to parents. Daycare abuse and exploitation are far more likely to occur in facilities that have limited parental access.
2. Make sure that the bathrooms do not contain areas where children can be isolated. Find out who takes the children to the bathroom, for what purposes, and at what times. Two thirds of all daycare sexual abuse and exploitation occurs during toileting.
3. Make sure that there is proper supervision of the children during naps. Children may be more at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation during naptime because other children are sleeping and staff may be out of the room.
4. Ask about the extent of education and training of all daycare personnel interacting with your children, and determine if they were screened for any criminal history in sexual or physical assault against children, emotional instability, or substance abuse. Be aware that volunteers or teacher's aides are not likely to have been carefully screened.

5. Find out who will be interacting with your children in addition to the daycare provider and staff. Much of the sexual and physical abuse and exploitation associated with daycare centers occurs at the hands of individuals not directly involved in the teaching or child-care responsibilities: bus drivers, janitors, and relatives of the daycare center providers. In 36 percent of the cases examined by a nationwide study of daycare abuse, children were sexually molested by family members related to the daycare provider—mainly husbands or sons. Make sure that your child's contact with such persons is limited, and question your child closely about them.
6. Discuss in depth with the daycare provider how the discipline of children is handled—who administers it, under what circumstances it is used, and what form it takes. Make sure to talk to your children each day about what happens at the daycare center, paying close attention to what punishments were used under what circumstances and any other incidents that made the child uncomfortable.

**Safety Tips for Children in Daycare**

Boys and girls of all ages are at risk of sexual and physical abuse and exploitation in daycare. The most important key to child safety is effective communication with your child. Listening to your children and making them feel loved and needed will go a long way toward reducing their risk of sexual abuse and exploitation. The first step you should take is to establish an atmosphere in the home in which your child feels comfortable talking about sensitive matters and embarrassing situations. The simple truth is that children are often reluctant to talk about their traumatic experiences—afraid that they will be ignored, misunderstood or, worse yet, blamed for what happened. Listen carefully to your children, and be alert to any changes in their behavior or reluctance to be with certain individuals.

Following are specific instructions to share with your children to help prevent sexual and physical abuse and exploitation in daycare.

1. You have the right to say *NO* to anyone who asks you to do something painful, embarrassing, or wrong. No matter what those persons may say, your parents would never allow you to be hurt or made uncomfortable.
2. No one should touch you in the parts of the body covered by the bathing suit, nor should you touch anyone else—adult or child—in those places. Your body is special and private.

3. When you are in the bathroom, no one should touch you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable or spend too much time watching you or fixing your clothes. You should *never* be asked to handle bodily wastes or blood in any way.
4. Do not remain alone with an adult in an isolated place—a bathroom, an office, a bedroom, a closet—if it makes you feel uncomfortable. Be especially careful at naptime, when the other children are asleep.
5. Do not let anyone trick you into keeping a "special secret"—by threatening you or by bribing you with gifts or candy.
6. No matter what someone tells you, no one has the power to harm you, your pets, or your parents. There are no wizards or witches with magical powers at the daycare center.
7. Do not let anyone take your picture in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable; if anyone takes your picture for any reason, be sure and tell your parents.
8. You can be assertive, and you have the right to say *NO* to someone who tries to take you away from the daycare center, touches you, or makes you feel uncomfortable in any way.

**Detecting Sexual Abuse and Exploitation**

Parents bear the chief responsibility of identifying and reporting sexual and physical abuse and exploitation in daycare. The reality of sexual exploitation is that often children are very confused, uncomfortable, and unwilling to talk about the experience. But *they will talk* if you have already established an atmosphere of trust and support in your home, where your children will feel free to talk without fear of accusation, blame, or guilt.

Parents should be alert to these indicators of sexual and physical abuse and exploitation:

- Changes in behavior, extreme mood swings, withdrawal, fearfulness, and excessive crying.
- Changes in bed-wetting, nightmares, fear of going to bed, or other sleep disturbances.
- Acting out inappropriate sexual activity or showing an unusual interest in sexual matters.
- A sudden acting out of feelings or aggressive or rebellious behavior.
- Regression to infantile behavior; clinging.
- School problems, behavior problems.
- Changes in toilet-training habits.
- A fear of certain places, people, or activities; an excessive fear of going to the daycare center.

- Bruises, rashes, cuts; limping; multiple or poorly explained injuries.
- Pain, itching, bleeding, fluid, or rawness in the private areas.

**What to Do**

There is always the chance that your child will disclose acts of abuse and exploitation in the daycare center. If this happens, we want you to be prepared to help the child.

Although you may feel panicky, try not to overreact or show alarm or anger in front of your child. *Do not* criticize or blame the child for the abuse. Strongly support the child's decision to tell of the abuse.

1. Do not return the child to the daycare center until you are convinced that it is safe.
2. Immediately alert the police, sheriff's office, or other law-enforcement agency.
3. Immediately alert the child protection, youth services, child abuse, or other appropriate social service organizations.
4. Seek out medical attention for the child. Call your doctor, or go to a clinic or hospital.
5. Discuss the need for counseling or therapy for the child with a doctor, social worker, law-enforcement, or member of the clergy.
6. Take appropriate steps, under the advice of child-care professionals and law-enforcement, to have other parents using the daycare center alerted.
7. Do not negotiate with the daycare director yourself; rely on the appropriate social service and licensing agencies.
8. If you are unsure about whether your child has experienced sexual and physical abuse and exploitation, consult with a doctor, social worker, law-enforcement, or member of the clergy.

The support and cooperation of the victim's parents are invaluable to the effective resolution of the sexual abuse case. Be open and available to the investigators and prosecutors handling your child's case. If there is media involvement in your case, make sure that your child's name and face, your name and face, and other private information remain confidential.

**The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children**

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) serves as a clearinghouse of information on missing and exploited children; provides technical assistance to citizens and law-

enforcement agencies; offers training programs to law-enforcement; distributes photographs and descriptions of missing children nationwide; coordinates child protection efforts with the private sector; networks with nonprofit service providers and state clearinghouses; and provides information and advice on effective state legislation to ensure the safety and protection of children.

A 24-hour toll-free telephone line is open for those who have information on missing and exploited children: **1-800-843-5678.** The TDD hotline (for the hearing impaired) is 1-800-826-7653. The NCMEC business number is (703) 235-3900.

A number of publications are available free of charge in single copies by writing the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Publications Department, 2101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 550, Arlington, Virginia 22201.

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